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A.D.H.Mayes: Exposition of Deuteronomy 4: 25-31

The Text

25. When you beget children and children's children,
and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly
by making a graven image in the form of anything,
and by doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord
26. your God, so as to provoke him to anger, I call
heaven and earth to witness against you this day,
that you will soon utterly perish from the land
which you are going over the Jordan to possess;
you will not live long upon it, but will be utterly
27. destroyed. And the Lord will scatter you among
the peoples, and you will be left few in number
among the nations where the Lord shall drive you.
28. And there you will serve gods of wood and stone,
the work of men's hands, that neither see, nor
29. hear, nor eat, nor smell. But from there you will
seek the Lord your God, and you will find him, if
you search after him with all your heart and with
30. all your soul. When you are in tribulation, and
all these things come upon you in the latter days,
you will return to the Lord your God and obey his
31. voice, for the Lord your God is a merciful God;
he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the
covenant with your fathers which he swore to them.

A. Context, background and theme

(1) Literary context and general background

Deuteronomy 4: 1-40 is a single long sermon which belongs to a fairly identifiable time and is addressed to a fairly clearly definable group of people. /1/ It begins in vs 1 with a phrase "And now" ("And now, O Israel, give heed to the statutes") which marks off what follows as distinct from and yet dependent on what precedes. The author turns from the subject of the previous chapters to

draw out in what follows the implications of what he has been saying. The preceding chapters have been a review of Israel's history up to the present: Israel encamped in Moab on the eve of her crossing the Jordan to go in and take possession of the land. Now the author turns to a consideration of what Israel's behaviour should be, particularly once she enters the land, and constantly alludes to historical events, and draws lessons from history which have a bearing on her behaviour.

Despite the impression thus given that 4:1-40 stands in an original relationship with what precedes, it must be emphasized that in fact chs 1-3 have been secondarily extended through the addition of 4:1-40. The historical account of chs 1-3 is not related with a view to convincing Israel that she should obey the law, which is the purpose which 4:1-40 presupposes in what precedes. Rather, chs 1-3 are a straightforward account which picks up again towards the end of the book of Deuteronomy, and then continues into the following book of Joshua where the fulfilment of the task for which Moses in Deut 31 commissioned Joshua is related. In fact, Deut 1-3 is the introduction to the so-called deuteronomistic history which extends from Deuteronomy to the end of II Kings, a comprehensive account of Israel from its point of entry into the land of Canaan to its expulsion from that land. The connection between Deut 1-3 and 4:1-40 is, therefore, quite artificial. This is confirmed by the observation that the elements of Israel's history which are referred to in 4:1-40 in order to motivate obedience to the law (the events at Baal-Peor, v. 3; the theophany at Horeb, vv 9-14, 33, 36; the exodus, vv 20, 34, 37) are not mentioned in the previous chapters.

But if the connection is secondary, it is also the case that 4:1-40 presupposes the presence of chs 1-3 in the use of the connecting phrase "and now"; it is, therefore, later than, and was composed for this context. The deuteronomistic history to which chs 1-3 belong was written, however, during the exile: the last event to which reference is made, in II Kings 25:27, is the release of the Judaeen king Jehoiachin from prison in exile. /2/ So this marks the earliest possible date for the composition of 4:1-40 also.

The sermon in these verses was composed for a late exilic period, and is addressed to an audience which has had first hand experience of the horrors of siege, death, destruction and exile. /3/ Terrible as the purely physical conditions of their experience had been, they were exacerbated by the spiritual and theological implications of the events which brought these experiences. The destruction of Judah and Jerusalem, and the exile of the people from their land, had profound consequences for a faith which was so intimately bound up with the land of Palestine. This land of promise had been bestowed on Israel on the basis of God's covenant with the patriarchs, and Israel's knowledge of God and worship of God were intimately connected with her possession of that land. Even if popular faith did not always hold to the idea of a quasi-physical relationship of God to the land (such as is presupposed in 1 Sam 26:19 and II Kings 5:17), it is still true that faith in the God of Israel could barely be expressed without reference to the land as the gift of God to his people. /4/

The consequences for faith of loss of land were serious: at best it meant that God had brought his relationship with his people to an end; at worst it signalled the victory of the gods of the nations over the God of Israel. In any case it signified for Israel the complete loss of all that gave meaning, stability and security to her life and faith. When the prophet of the exile, Second Isaiah, responded to the call of God to the prophetic office, by saying "all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field" (Isa.40:6), he only echoes what must have been the general mood of his people in exile who had experienced this loss: there is no point, all is transitory, there is nothing anymore which gives stability and endurance and meaning to life.

It is this mood of hopelessness that both prophets and deuteronomistic writers seek to counter. Second Isaiah received as a reply to his objection to his call the affirmation "The grass withers, the flower fades: but the word of our God will stand for ever". The security of land possession, the stability of nationhood, these are indeed illusions; what is enduring and secure in the word of God alone. In order to make a similar point, the deuteronomistic

historian in the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8 denies that God can be restricted to the land of Judah or the temple in Jerusalem (v.27), and proclaims that even in exile in a foreign land the people of God may repent and make supplication to God and will be heard (vv 46-53). This word of God - what is it? This repentance of the people in exile - how is it to be expressed? It is for concrete guidance to a people despairing of the future, broken in spirit and weak in faith that our exilic preacher has composed a sermon preserved in Deut 4: 1-40.

(ii) Responsibility before the law in Deut 4: 1-40

These verses bear all the marks of a sermon: simplicity, directness, urgency; it is a sermon full of exhortation and encouragement, backed up and strengthened by warnings and threats. Obedience to the law in general is its concern, but particular emphasis is laid on the second commandment of the decalogue, the prohibition of making images. This commandment is in fact the chief concern of the whole passage (see vv 12,15-18,23,25,28) within the context of its overall concern for observance of the law in general.

The impact of the chapter and the urgency of its exhortation are reinforced by the regular appearance of formulaic language which has a powerful cumulative effect: the verb 'command' with either God or Moses as subject is used with reference to the commandments in vv 2,5,13,14,23, 40. It was in the context of the covenant making at Horeb that Moses received from God the commands which he is to deliver to the people. This basic covenant making event is referred to on three occasions, in vv 12,15,33, while its counterpart, God's merciful and gracious deliverance of his people from bondage in Egypt, likewise receives a threefold reference (vv 20,34,37).

The present generation has a particular responsibility with regard to obedience to the law, for it is they who have witnessed the very things which demonstrate the reality of God and are the foundation of the demand which he makes on his people ('your eyes have seen', vv 3,9; 'before your eyes' v.34). This responsibility extends, moreover, to future generations: children must be taught the divine demand which comes with membership in the

people of God (vv 9,10,25,40; indeed the transmission of the faith to the children is a theme of considerable significance in Deuteronomy; cf. also 6:7; 11:19 /5/)

The purpose of all this is the enjoyment of life in the land which God gives to Israel. Sometimes obedience to the law is presented as the condition of entering the land at all (as in 4:1). Elsewhere we find that it is in the land that the law is to be obeyed (as in 6:1, 10ff.). These are not two quite different views; basic to both is that obedience to the law of God is necessary for life (see 4:4), but 'life' for Israel usually means living in the land (see 4:26, 40). The land, living in the land, possession of the land - this is the very sign of life with God. It is the land of promise, a promise made to the fathers of Israel that their descendants would one day possess the land. The land is, therefore, the gift of God to Israel, but a gift which can be appropriated and enjoyed only in obedience to the law of God. It is referred to in intimate association with the law throughout the chapter (see vv 1, 5, 14, 21-23, 26, 38-40): Israel's possession of the land is the very expression of her status as the elect people of God.

(iii) The sin of Israel and its consequences

Vv 25-31 of Deut 4 stand at the very heart of the sermon and express in nuce its dominant theme: sin brings punishment, but punishment may, after repentance, be succeeded by restoration.

(a) Sin

Many of the English Versions (such as RSV and NEB) in their translations of v. 25 state the sin as simply that of making a graven image: "When you beget children and children's children and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by making a graven image.....". However more accurate are the AV and RV translations: "When thou shalt beget children and children's children, and ye shall have been long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image.....". Here the making of a graven image is clearly the symptom of a deeper corruption rather than being the sin in itself. This corruption is what follows on having "been long in the land" (RV)

or "grown old in the land" (RSV), a phrase which uses a verb otherwise appearing in Lev.26:10 and Song of Solomon 7:13. In these passages the idea of staleness is present, and it is that which clearly indicates what is in the mind of the writer here. Long familiarity with the benefits of the land, automatic acceptance of its fruit and prosperity, will lead to forgetfulness of the fact that it is to God and to God alone that thankfulness for these things is constantly due: "Take heed.....lest, when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart is lifted up, and you forget the Lord your God.....Beware lest you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth' ". This quotation, from Deut 8:11-17 then goes on immediately to warn against going after other gods to serve and worship them; and it is just this connection which lies also in Deut 4:25 - "growing old" in the land is the very basis of apostasy.

It is true that Deut 4 is concerned particularly with making graven images rather than generally with apostasy, and that since this prohibition is anchored in the fact that Israel "saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke to you at Horeb" (v.15) it is images of Israel's God which are intended. Yet the author of this sermon does not stop short at thinking that the worship of an image is just another (though prohibited) form of worship of God. That an image should embody the divine presence makes the divine presence subject to human use, to human manipulation; in effect it makes the divine presence something which is quite alien to the nature of God. The sovereign freedom of God the Creator, as described for example in 4:32-36, is absolutely incompatible with the notion of the divine presence contained in an image. The worship of an image is, therefore, the worship of something which is not God and so is apostasy. /6/ Apostasy is the chief prohibition; its precise form may change from generation to generation, from culture to culture, but its basic character remains the same: it is the worship of that which is not God. /7/

(b) Punishment

The punishment with which a disobedient people is here threatened is destruction and exile. This gains a peculiar poignancy when read against the background of the time and audience to which the words are addressed. Judah and Jerusalem had experienced just this in their immediate past. In effect the whole of Israel's history is here interpreted as a time when through confident appropriation to her own use of the gifts of God she has forgotten the true source of her life and prosperity and brought upon herself the destructive consequences of apostasy. Her present state of expulsion from the land, of being few in number, of being scattered among the nations, is the very outworking of the curse which results from disobedience to covenant law. Her covenant with God at Sinai had brought liberation from Egypt, land and growth; that these blessings should now be reversed is a sign of the dissolution of that covenant.

Exile was a common feature of foreign policy on the part of ancient near eastern nations in their wars of conquest. Through scattering their defeated enemies throughout the different lands of their empires, they minimized the possibility of organized and unified revolt on the part of any particular subject state. It is a punishment frequently threatened, moreover, in the curses of vassal treaty texts as a possible consequence of the vassal's refusal to obey the treaty stipulations. Here Israel's misfortune is not the result of destructive attack by another nation: rather it is her own God who has cut off his people. That even this should be ascribed to the will and work of God represents a fundamental transformation in the early popular notion of what is meant to be a member of the people of God. This is a God whose judgment and punishment are directed not only at those with whom his people are at war, but (and even primarily) at that very people who call themselves the elect people of God.

(c) Repentance and restoration

Yet this is not the end. The deuteronomistic history, into the context of which this sermon has been set, has often been interpreted as providing a complete account of Israel's history, seen as having been brought

to an absolute end through Israel's sin; no hope can be held out for the future. Israel's exile meant the end of her covenant with God, an end fully deserved as the result of continuous provocation throughout her history; all opportunities for reform had been given, and there can now be no return to her former status as an elect people. This bleak presentation is certainly justified by the dominant portrayal of Israel's history by the deuteronomistic historian as a time of turning away from God resulting in punishment (see, for example, the summary characterization of the history of the immediate post-settlement period in Judges 2: 6-23). Deut 4:29-31 is one passage which brings a glimmer of relief to this portrait: even in exile Israel may return with confidence to God. /8/. The basis of this assurance is not spelt out in detail. But one significant point is made; God will not forget the covenant which he made with the patriarchs. Israel's future will find its theological basis not on the old Sinai covenant which has been nullified through sin, but in the even older patriarchal covenant. /9/ This was a covenant of promise which included two major elements: that the descendants of the patriarchs should be a great nation and that they should possess the land of Palestine (cf. Gen. 15). In the fulfilment of these two promises the curses which breach of the Sinaitic covenant brought will be reversed: instead of being scattered Israel will be gathered from the nations; instead of being few in number she will be "more prosperous and numerous than your fathers"; instead of perishing from the land she will be brought into the land.

8. Israel as the covenant people of God

(i) Covenant in the OT

The nature and significance of the shift in understanding which is implied in this affirmation of hope despite sin and destruction can really be appreciated only after a fuller consideration of covenant in the OT. The book of Deuteronomy is particularly important here because although the belief that Israel stands in a covenant relationship with God probably has pre-deuteronomic roots it is in Deuteronomy that this category is emphasized, practically to the exclusion of all others. /10/ The prophets used

the analogy of the relationship between a bride and her husband, or between a father and son; with Deuteronomy it is as a covenant relationship that Israel's relationship with her God is described. In this way the author best felt able to express the view that God's election of Israel laid on the people certain moral and religious obligations. Covenants or contracts were already well known and widely used forms by which relationships between individuals and between nations were expressed (cf. Gen 31:44 for the covenant between Jacob and Laban; and 1 Kings 5:12 for the covenant between Israel and Tyre). In Deuteronomy this form is adopted to express the relationship between God and Israel.

There is an important aspect of the adoption of this form which deserves emphasis. It has become increasingly clear from the steady stream of research on the subject over many years that the forms of international treaties, particularly those which regulated relations between suzerains and their vassals, have deeply influenced the OT presentation of Israel's covenant with God. The Hittite treaties with their characteristic didactic use of history as a means of persuading the vassal to obey the treaty stipulations, and the later Assyrian treaties with their characteristic long and explicit curses intended to terrify the vassal into a state of compliance, have both left their imprint in the OT. Once again, as with the covenant theme, it is in Deuteronomy, and in texts such as Joshua 24 which reveal the distinctive style and thought of circles to which we owe Deuteronomy, that the influence of the treaties is most obvious. /11/

The command that Israel should love God with all her heart, soul and might (Deut 6:4) is paralleled by the treaty demand that the vassal should love his suzerain, and means that Israel/the vassal should be faithful and loyal to God/the suzerain; in Deut 8:2-6 (and frequently elsewhere), where history is used in a didactic way to teach lessons for the present, the parenetic or preaching style may be stronger than anything found in the treaties, but the historical prologue in the Hittite treaty texts in principle serves the same

function of introducing and supplying a basis for the demand which follows; the verb "know" is used in Deut 9:24; 11:28; 13:2 in a sense familiar from the treaties: the mutual legal recognition of a suzerain and his vassal; the series of verbs used in Deut 13:4 (walk after, fear, obey his voice, serve, cleave) all have a background in the vocabulary of the treaties, expressing a concern for the vassal's right attitude towards his suzerain; in Deut 28 many direct parallels may be drawn with the curse sections of the Assyrian treaty texts, and it is possible even that in some parts of the chapter only direct dependence on these extra-biblical curses can explain the peculiar content and the particular order in which these curses appear. /12/

But aside from such detailed points of contact there is also an impressive parallel in general structure between Deuteronomy with its succession of parenetic history (chs 5-11), laws (chs 12-26) and blessing-curse (chs 27-28) and the overall structure of extra-biblical treaty texts. Outside these central chapters, in the framework, to which 4:1-40 belongs, the influence of the extra-biblical treaties is also clear. Even where there is no question of a treaty or covenant text being present as in Deut 4:1-40, this influence is present. This chapter is a speech or sermon which is informed by treaty forms and terminology, but which remains a speech or sermon.

(ii) The expression of Israel's covenant faith

Deut 4:1-40 can be broken down into a number of sections, each of which begins with a warning to obey the law, a warning which is then reinforced through reference to history. This is not to say that these are originally separate units: all of them in fact together constitute a single form in which, though particularly in vv 9-31, the influence of the near eastern treaty form is significant. The mixture of exhortation and historical allusion in vv 9-14 leads up to and lays the foundation for the prohibition of making images vv 15-24. This is then rounded off and completed by the curse and blessing in

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vv 25-31. That pattern, the succession of history, law, curse and blessing, is quite typical of the treaties.

These treaties were legal forms, and there was an obvious danger in the use of them in this religious context. This consisted in the clear possibility that the faith of Israel would become dominated by legalism. That would find its expression in the belief that one could remain a member only by such obedience and that obedience and disobedience would be accompanied by appropriate rewards and punishments. In such a system God is reduced to the level of man; there is little if any room for the grace of God, for repentance and forgiveness of sin; all emphasis effectively lies on the efforts of man himself to work out his own salvation.

Yet the OT, and Deuteronomy in particular, has gone some considerable way towards guarding against this legalistic influence. /13/ It is true that in several ways the immanence of God is forcibly expressed: for example, Deut 4:7 declares that there is no other nation "that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us, whenever we call upon him"; the epithets by which God can be described - Jealous (4:24), merciful (4:31); great and terrible (7:21), faithful (7:9) - necessarily endow God with qualities that can only be understood in a very human way; the declaration that God has caused his name to dwell at a particular sanctuary (as in 12:5) also expresses the idea of God's dwelling among his people. Yet, on the other hand, God's transcendence is safeguarded equally strongly. /14/ Deut 4:36 will not have God on earth, only his voice is heard out of the midst of the fire while he himself remains in heaven; in 10:14 not only the earth but the heavens and the heaven of heavens belong to God; the sacred ark, long understood as the throne or pedestal of the invisible God living among his people (cf. Num. 10.35f.) is now no more than a box in which the tablets of the law are kept (Deut 10:1-5); sacrifice, which could so easily be understood as a means by which an angry god might be propitiated, is indeed permitted, though its function is strictly controlled: it may have a place as an expression of gratitude to God in the fulfilment of vows (Deut 12.6), but its chief use is that it may be shared with the deprived elements of society,

the poor, the Levite, the stranger, the orphan and the widow (Deut 12:11f). Throughout Deuteronomy there is a very strong tendency towards a spiritualizing of life, in the sense that the divine is freed from the control of man, the action of man in sacrifice, prayer and confession, can no longer be the means by which the divine may be made to conform to the wishes of the worshipper but must only be an expression of a right attitude towards God on the part of the worshipper.

That the relationship between God and Israel is not dependent simply on human effort is made clear in several ways. Chief among these is the general OT presentation of the exodus from Egypt as an act of grace on the part of God which takes place before any demand is made. It is in that primary event that Israel became the elect people of God. This was on the basis not of any merit of her own, either of power or righteousness, but solely the quite undeserved favour of God. It is not, therefore, by Israel's effort that she becomes the people of God; it is only by the initiative of God himself that this relationship is established, and only then is a demand laid on this people. Deut 27:9-10 expresses this concisely and clearly: "this day you have become the people of the Lord your God. You shall therefore obey the voice of the Lord your God". By this means both the freedom and the initiative of God are preserved.

At the other end the freedom of God is maintained. The treaties sometimes explicitly indicate that if the vassal is obedient then the suzerain will protect him, assure him and his successors of the throne and so on. In Deut 9:4ff. the idea that God might be under obligation to Israel is rejected, firstly, through the assertion that it is not because of Israel's righteousness that she is being given the land, but rather because of the unrighteousness of the nations, and secondly, through the reference to the oath sworn to the patriarchs. It is in fulfilment of his promise to the patriarchs that God is giving Israel the land, not by reason of any faithfulness on Israel's part (see also 4:31).

(iii) Breach of covenant and divine forgiveness

That Israel should by her own effort of will obey the law and be pleasing to God would have been seen by the author of Deut 4 as out of question. Despite his constant warnings against disobedience, which seem to presuppose that he does think in terms of Israel being able to obey, his description of what is to happen in vv 25-31 accepts the future disobedience and punishment of the people as quite inevitable. Yet the author has not taken the way of Jeremiah 31, where Israel's ultimate ability to obey is seen to be the result of God's giving her a new heart on which his law will be written; rather, his concern for the sovereignty and freedom of God, his concern too for the place of repentance and divine forgiveness in man's relations with God, lead him to posit a different way by which God and man might remain together despite man's absolute inability to comply with the way of behaviour which God requires.

It is this which has involved modification of the extra-biblical treaty structure, removing an important aspect of its legal expression, a modification which is apparent in the verses of Deut 4 with which we are here concerned. While the treaty form presented curse and blessing as alternative possibilities following on disobedience and obedience to the law, in Deut 4:25-31 this is no longer the case. Curse and blessing are preserved, but not as alternate possibilities; rather, they are successive events which are connected by repentance and forgiveness. /15/ Breach of covenant no longer implies the absolute end of the covenant relationship; through repentance there will be forgiveness and the establishment of a new relationship.

There are fundamental modifications which have transformed a legal form into a means by which divine transcendence and freedom, human repentance and divine forgiveness, might become essential features of the understanding and expression of a relationship between God and Israel, which has its beginning and end in an unmerited act of divine love.

B. Restoration and renewal

In the establishment of a new relationship when the old covenant has been broken, it is not simply a matter of Israel's being forgiven so that things may return to their former state. Rather, this is something wholly new. The former state cannot be restored since its theological basis is utterly destroyed; it must be a quite new foundation on which the Israel of the future will be built. The precise implications of this are not set out in detail by Deuteronomy; but the writer here is nevertheless representative of a certain theological conviction which does find more detailed expression elsewhere in the OT among his near contemporaries. Important here is Jer 31:31-34, a passage which, taking full and serious account of the fact that the old covenant made at Sinai is now broken, promises a new covenant which while requiring Israel's obedience to the divine law, will nevertheless be dependent throughout on the divine initiative. The quality and reliability of Israel's own effort in this context have already been seen to be completely defective; so now it is God himself who will through his grace enable Israel to obey the law of her covenant relationship with her God.

While the author of Deut 4:25-31 does not give this precise expression to his understanding of the new relationship between God and Israel, his view lays no less emphasis on the basic significance of the divine initiative in the establishment and maintenance of this relationship. The old covenant of Horeb is at an end; the new relationship cannot be based on that. Yet there remains an older covenant than that concluded at Horeb, and it is to this that the author appeals. This is the covenant with the fathers: the promise made to Abraham, and renewed to Isaac and Jacob, that their descendants would be many and would possess the land. Through appeal to this ancient covenant, the author can, while maintaining these essential features of divine sovereignty and freedom, also proclaim: despite your utter faithlessness, despite your total failure in living the life of a people chosen by God, the mercy of God, the forgiveness of God and the love of God are constant and unchanging. To a dejected and scattered people, convinced of its rejection, this proclamation

offered the only possible basis for life.

Notes

1. The most recent detailed work on this passage is that of G. Braulik, Die Mittel deuteronomischer Rhetorik, Analecta Biblica 68, Rome 1978. Particularly for the exposition of the chapter reference should also be made to N. Lohfink, Höre Israel. Auslegung von Texten aus dem Buch Deuteronomium, Dusseldorf 1965, 90ff
2. This is the view of the classic work² on the subject, M. Noth, Ueberlieferungsgeschichte Studien, Tuebingen 1957, 12. Some modification of Noth's detailed presentation, particularly with regard to the unity of the work, is probably necessary, but this does not substantially affect the major point at issue here.
3. That the audience is a post-exilic one is possible but unlikely. There is no indication that the exile is over; restoration is held out as a possibility for the future dependent on repentance and obedience. The background is the same as that of Second Isaiah, with whom the author of Deut 4:1-40 has many contacts. See my Deuteronomy (New Century Bible), London 1979, in loc.
4. For an extensive theological presentation of the subject of land in the Bible, which sees this as a particularly important theological theme also in modern American cultural conditions, cf. W. Brueggemann, The Land, London 1978.
5. The connection between this instruction and the wisdom setting of the teacher instructing his pupil has been discussed by J.W. McKay, "Man's love for God in Deuteronomy and the Father/Teacher-Son/Pupil Relationship", VT 22, 1972, 432ff.
6. Cf. Lohfink, Höre Israel, 107
7. On the antiquity of the idea of the chief commandment, cf. Lohfink, The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament, London 1969, 87ff
8. It has already been noted that Deut 4: 1-40 is

not an original part of the deuteronomistic history to which Deut 1-3 is the introduction. That it is to the second edition of the deuteronomistic history, to which Deut 4:1-40 may be assigned, that all those passages which express hope for the future belong, is possible; the answer depends on an extensive literary-critical treatment of the whole deuteronomistic history. For a short treatment of the subject in relation to Deuteronomy, cf. my Deuteronomy, 41ff.

9. In this emphasis on the covenant with the patriarchs, it is possible that a close connection should be seen to exist between this chapter and the priestly writing of the Pentateuch. For this account provides no version of the Sinaitic covenant, parallel to the JE account, but instead in Gen.17 emphasizes the covenant between God and Abraham. The priestly writing, written for an audience struggling with the difficulties and disappointments of the first years after the release from exile, was, like Deut.4, aimed at providing a new theological self-understanding for a community for which the old Sinaitic covenant was no longer relevant, cf. R.C.Clements, Abraham and David. Genesis 15 and its meaning for Israelite Tradition, London 1967, pp 74ff.

10. For a fuller consideration of this, with bibliographical references cf. my Deuteronomy, 60ff.

11. See especially the comprehensive works of M. Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School, Oxford 1972; and D.J. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant, Analecta Biblica 21, Rome 1978.

12. Cf. Weinfeld, "Traces of Assyrian Treaty Formulae in Deuteronomy", Bib 41, 1960, 420ff.

13. Cf. Lohfink, "Die Wandlung des Bundesbegriffs im Buch Deuteronomium", Gott in Welt (Festgabe für Karl Rahner), edited by H. Vorgrimler, vol.1, Freiburg 1964, 423ff.

14. Cf. Clements, God and Temple, Oxford 1965, 88ff

15. This is also the case in Deut. 30:1ff.; this

passage also has close links with Jer 31, in its view that Israel will experience a change of heart, effected by God, which will enable her to obey the law.

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"The Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel"(1)

Some observations

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In this investigation we propose to clarify our understanding in relation to the terminology of the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel and, in particular, to that of the Farewell Discourse.

It is notable that the term 'Spirit' by itself (=pneuma) is more typical of Johannine usage /1/ than 'Holy Spirit' which is only used on three occasions in this Gospel, i.e., 1.33; 14.26; 20.22. That there are only three such occurrences raises the question for us as to whether there is a certain reserve in the use of the phrase 'Holy Spirit'. In the first occurrence it is part of the traditional Gospel phrase, 'This is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit' (1.33). In the tradition represented by Mark, the Baptist proclaims one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit, the Coming One(1.8). The tradition behind the Q source is somewhat different with the addition 'and of fire' (Mt 3.11; Lk 3.16). In Acts, too, the traditional phrase is echoed, 'baptize with the Holy Spirit' (1.5; 11.16). Such a phrase is all the more noticeable as absent from the rest of the NT. Is the Johannine usage connected with the fact that the phrase has a firm place in the Gospel tradition and part of it is the fuller phrase 'Holy Spirit'? That it is more primitive is suggested by the fact that the phrase is found in the OT (Cf. 'take not your Holy Spirit from me', Psalm 51.11), in Qumran, in the Marcan tradition where the 'Holy' of 'Holy Spirit' can be set over against the 'unclean spirit', a description of demons found often in Mark, and is found in the primitive tradition of Q. Gradually as the church became more familiar with the concept of 'Holy Spirit', the need to define 'Spirit' as holy would be less felt.

If the writer then is reserved in his use of the phrase 'Holy Spirit' as a traditional phrase, the three occasions on which he uses it, could be of special significance within the Gospel.

In the first passage John's Gospel is true to the tradition of Marcan terminology by saying the 'Spirit descends on Jesus' (Mk 1.10; John 1.32). Where he differs however is in making the phrase part of the Baptist's testimony, 'I saw the Spirit descend like a dove and it rested on him'. The Baptist has been told that the one on whom the Spirit descends and 'rests' ('rests' represents the characteristic 'meno' of the Fourth Gospel) is the one who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit. We may note some of the features of the Johannine presentation that are peculiar to his theology: to him the Baptist is the witness to Jesus par excellence (1.6ff) whose witness speaks of the Lamb of God bearing away the sin of the world and results in two of his disciples following Jesus. It is in keeping with this that he should bear witness to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus. The addition to the familiar tradition of the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus lies in the word 'rest'. It is characteristic of Johannine soteriology. Here it stresses the point, a quite valid one, that the Spirit was Jesus' abiding possession and that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the 'Holy Spirit'. Such a stress was important to his presentation of the teaching on the Holy Spirit.

It is obvious that there are many distinctive elements here that belong to what we might call 'redaction'. Yet for all the newness of a language which is closely bound up with his theology, the writer does not abandon the traditional phrase. Familiar phrases from the tradition appear throughout his distinctive theology. Is there an attempt to assure his readers by the use of the familiar phrase that he is not as revolutionary as might have been thought? Is it by way of confirmation here and there throughout the Gospel that he is loyal to the tradition and yet loyal to the Holy Spirit who leads into all truth?

We are told then that Jesus is the one who is to baptize with the 'Holy Spirit' and this can project our thoughts to the future moment when it is due to take

place. This expectation is sustained by the use at intervals of what is called Jesus' 'hour'. It is the hour of death, whether described as 'going' or 'being lifted up' or 'being glorified' and it is bound up closely with the bestowal of the Spirit. This bestowal of the Spirit is related to another of the three uses of the phrase 'Holy Spirit'. Toward the end of the Gospel, Jesus as risen Lord says to the disciples 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (20.22). It is to be the final reference to the Spirit. It is the handing over of Jesus' mission to the disciples - as the Father had sent him, so he sends the disciples. As he possessed the Spirit, they now possess it. As he pronounced forgiveness, so now they are empowered to pronounce forgiveness.

We may note again the link of 'Holy Spirit' in a traditional phrase. Previously it was linked with the word 'baptize' to form the phrase 'He it is who shall baptize with the Holy Spirit'. Now it is linked up with the word 'receive'. The phrase 'receive (= lambano) the Holy Spirit' is traditional. We are told for example that Jesus, when exalted, 'had received the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2.33). The disciples of the Baptist are asked by Paul at Ephesus, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers ?' (Acts 19. 2; cf. Rom 8.15). The bestowal of authority on the leaders of the church as its representatives is traditional as we can see in the parallel tradition in Matthew (16.19; cf. 18.18) though the phrasing is different (John 20.23)

On the other hand we have distinctive or redactional elements: Jesus, the Logos by whom all things were made including man, 'breathed' (= 'enephusen') on the disciples (20.22). The term recalls the Genesis story of creation. Are we being told of a new creation, the church commissioned to proclaim forgiveness to the world ? /2/ The form of the so-called 'Great Commission' varies in the traditions /3/ but its language and form here and its positioning are Johannine: the form ('As the Father sent me, so do I send you') can be compared to that in the Farewell Discourse, 'As you

have sent me into the world, so have I sent them also into the world' (17.18); the greeting 'Peace be unto you', repeated in this passage (20.19,21) and thus made emphatic, recalls the tradition of a resurrection appearance in Luke (24.36) - not however in Matthew and Mark - but the extent of its development in the Fourth Gospel is distinctive e.g., 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you' (14.27); again the Fourth Gospel has a remarkable frequency in its use of the words for 'send' ('pempo' and 'apostello'). /4/

Thus again in another instance of the use of the phrase 'Holy Spirit' this time with the traditional verb 'receive', we also have many distinctive elements expressive of Johannine thought and interpretation which we can describe as redactional. The link of the familiar with the unfamiliar is striking.

A third occurrence (second in order in the Gospel) of the phrase 'Holy Spirit' is to be found in the Farewell Discourse (14.26), and is of course the only example in the Discourse. The description 'Paraklētes' is distinctive in the Gospel for the Holy Spirit and is confined to the Farewell Discourse, occurring on four occasions (14.16,26; 15.26; 16.7 of 1 John 2.1). /5/ But 'Paraclete' is not the only description of the Holy Spirit that is distinctive here. There is the explanatory expansion 'Spirit of Truth' /6/, perhaps included as a kind of apologetic to those who question whether the writer or his community possess the true Holy Spirit. /7/ It comes in by way of a guarantee of the valid operation of the Paraclete who reveals the Word of Jesus i.e., the 'truth'.

We may note the juxtaposition of 'Holy Spirit' with the exceptional term 'Paraclete', 'The Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name' (14.26). Is the phrase 'Holy Spirit' along with the phrase 'Spirit of Truth' an explanatory or reassuring expansion of 'Paraclete'? It must be admitted that all references of whatever form to the Holy Spirit in the Farewell Discourse are dominated by the initial reference which comes in abruptly and without

explanation, 'He will give you another Paraclete' (14.16). We are told for the first time that Jesus is a 'Paraclete' and that the Holy Spirit is 'another Paraclete'. That Jesus can be called a 'Paraclete' could be taken in itself as a type of reassurance for the meaning given it in connection with the Holy Spirit. It is the authentic Spirit who represents Jesus and is identified with him. By his insertion of the phrase 'Holy Spirit' is the writer deliberately combining the familiar, the traditional, with the new? By itself the phrase 'Holy Spirit' would hardly be noticed. But when due attention is paid to the fact that the phrase only occurs on three occasions in the Gospel, it may not here be incidental. Is it a phrase which belongs to a way of teaching that to the writer is outmoded? Is he looking for more and adventurous ways of expressing the truth as it is in Jesus and only with reluctance does he hold on to archaic methods of expression? This is an alternative explanation to the one suggested above and may suggest that the reserve is perhaps not so deliberate but that the writer slips into making links with former usage and this is evident in the occasional emergence of the phrase 'Holy Spirit', especially in stock or frozen or stereotyped phrases.

If the reserve in the use of the phrase 'Holy Spirit' is deliberate, then it serves to bind together (i) the initial assertion that Jesus, on whom the Spirit rested, is to baptize with the Holy Spirit; (ii) the promise as fulfilled in the last reference to the 'Holy Spirit'; and (iii) the Paraclete who is to come when Jesus goes. The bestowal of the Holy Spirit is thus bound up with Jesus' 'going', with his hour of glorification.

As already suggested, the reference to Jesus as the one to baptize with the Holy Spirit would point us forward to the occasion on which it takes place. In Mark's Gospel such an expectation is not fulfilled and we are left with the unresolved promise 'He shall baptize with the Holy Spirit'. This is not to say that Mark does not presume that the

bestowal of the Spirit has taken place - that he retains the prophecy implies its fulfilment - yet he does not, as John's Gospel does, keep pointing us forward in an integrated and sustained way to the moment of the conferring of the Spirit.

The impression given us at times in the Fourth Gospel with its concentration on the person of Jesus is that the Spirit is almost irrelevant. There is no mention of the Spirit in the Prologue with its hymn to the Logos. The man who believes on Jesus has eternal life now (3.16). The man who follows Jesus, the Light of the world, does not walk in darkness now (8.12); though he is dead, yet shall he live (11.25). The Gospel expresses the convictions and the experiences of the church it addresses who share fellowship with Christ in the here and now.

Yet alongside stress on the immediacy of the believers' experience of Christ now, there is a constant pointing forward to the coming of the Spirit. We are told that the Spirit was not given as yet since Jesus was not glorified, and that those who believed in him were about to receive the Spirit (7.38,39). In the Farewell Discourse, the Spirit will only come after Jesus' death. The tenses are regularly future: 'he will give you another Paraclete' (14.16), 'will teach.....bring to your remembrance' (14.26), 'will bear witness to me' (15.26), 'will guide you into all truth' (16.13).

There is little or no diminishing of the future emphasis. There is not for example in relation to these future promises the use of the confessional or ecclesiastical 'We' as we have in the sentence, 'We beheld his glory, glory as of the unique son of the Father' (1.14) or the sentence, 'We speak what we know and testify what we have seen' (3.11). It is never said by way of confirmation of the promise that the Paraclete will teach all things, 'We know that he is teaching us now' nor are we told, 'We know that he is leading us into all truth'.

There is one possible exception to this future emphasis, 'You know him for he dwells with you' (14.17). Here is one point where the immediacy of the exper-

iences of the believing community may constrain the writer to break with his literary and theological structure. On the other hand, the use of the term for an abiding relationship ('dwells'='meno') along with the phrase 'is in you', reminds us of the terms used of the believer's relationship in Christ. Is Christ, the Paraclete, rather meant? The parallel functions between Jesus and the Holy Spirit have often been mentioned e.g., both are sent by the Father, are spoken of as 'coming', as bearing witness to Jesus, as not speaking of themselves, as rejected by the world. /8/ It is possible that such a close identity emerges here. On the other hand, the present 'dwells' can be interpreted rather as future (there is only a difference in accent between the present and future of 'menei') and the 'know' as a futuristic present i.e., 'you are to know him'. Insofar however as they know Jesus, they may be said to know the Paraclete. Insofar as Jesus abides in them, so the Holy Spirit will abide in them. Yet it may be here that the present reality of the experience breaks in and this is one point where the constant pointing forward to the coming of the Paraclete wavers. The main forward emphasis still remains.

Why this pointing forward? It is bound up with the 'going' of Jesus. The coming of the Spirit is bound up with Jesus' death. This is something which cannot be treated lightly. The Holy Spirit does not operate as if there was no necessity for the death of Jesus. The historic death of Jesus has to take place first. The future sayings are a recognition of the necessity of history, and a movement within time. It is a fact that Jesus must 'go' to the Father. Otherwise the Spirit cannot come (16.7). The Spirit cannot impinge on the work of Jesus. It may be related to the fact that he is the one on whom the Spirit 'rests'. In any case apart from resting on Jesus, the Paraclete has no function to fulfil until Jesus is glorified (cf. 7.39). The dependence of the operation of the Spirit on the work of Jesus could hardly be more completely emphasized.

Parallel to this looking forward to the coming of the Holy Spirit which receives special emphasis naturally in the Farewell Discourse, there is also within the earlier part of the Gospel the movement forward to Jesus' death. It is expressed in the terminology referred to above of the 'hour'. He reveals to his mother who asks for help when the wine is run out at a wedding celebration, 'My hour has not as yet come' (2.4; cf. 8.20) which in the context suggests that the transformation of the water, representing Judaism, into the new wine of the kingdom will take place then. The effect of this early saying is to focus attention on the 'hour'. It is not unrelated to the forward suggestion in the words, 'Behold the Lamb of God who bears away ('is to bear away'?) the sin of the world', or in the words, 'Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it remains alone' (12.24) . It can be applied to many aspects of the Christian life described in the Gospel e.g., the 'hour' to be born from above (3.5) or in which worship of the Father in spirit and in truth will be possible (4.23), 'The hour is coming and now is when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth'. It is the hour of resurrection, 'The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they who hear, shall live'.

This looking forward to the 'hour' of Jesus' death is paralleled in emphasis with the repeated announcement in a different tense and extending throughout the Farewell Discourse, 'The hour has come' (12.23; 13.1; 17.1). Finally to mark the completion of the 'hour', Jesus said on the Cross, 'It is finished' (= 'tetelestai') and 'gave up his spirit'. The suggestion that Jesus is here yielding up his spirit to be poured out upon the church continues to receive support. /9/ It can explain why the Spirit cannot come until Jesus goes away, and whatever we may think of this suggestion, it does justice to the close association of Jesus' death and the pouring out of the Spirit in the Gospel. There are thus two focal points within the Gospel, the 'hour' when Jesus is to die

and the coming of the Paraclete. Since the latter is closely bound up with Jesus' death and the description of Jesus' death can suggest 'exaltation' as well, (cf. hupsoō = 'lift up' or 'exalt'), it is not out of place to suggest that 'tetelestai' can be the key to the whole Gospel's theology. Corell, for example, claims that the whole of the Fourth Gospel is the story of the death of Jesus viewed as an eschatological fact.

/10/

There is then a pointing forward to Jesus' death in the earlier part of the Gospel. It is not, as we have seen, a sombre presentation. Such a death is described as a lifting up, an exaltation. The verb 'hupsoō' is regularly used for the exaltation of Jesus e.g. "'exalted' to the right hand of the Father " (Acts.2.33; cf. 5.31; 13.17). It is a 'glorification' (12.23). Even before it takes place, Jesus can speak of himself as the 'Resurrection and the Life' (11.25) It would appear that the evangelist can hardly speak of the death of Jesus without seeing it in the context of triumph or of glory. In the struggle between light and darkness, life and death, Christ and Satan, there can be only one result. This is not to say that it is not a real death Jesus undergoes. There is nothing that is docetic here. He was 'crucified' as the two others were (19.18). He felt the pangs of thirst (19.28) and when they pierced his side blood and water came out (19.34). /11/ But the exaltation comes thrusting through the Farewell Discourse and is especially evident in the terms that are used for Jesus' departure whether 'hupagō' (14.4,5,28) or 'poreuomai' (14.2,3,12,28). The final emphasis before the death itself is in the lengthy Farewell Discourse but, within this emphasis, there is the other, that of the coming of the Paraclete. Whatever may be the implications of Jesus' work for the church, it cannot be separated from the continuing activity of the Holy Spirit. In the Lucan presentation Jesus ascends to God before the Holy Spirit descends. It is then Peter proclaims Jesus crucified and risen through whom forgiveness is offered. Similarly in our Gospel, the mission of the church after the pattern of Jesus in proclaiming

forgiveness can only take place after Jesus' work is ended.

It would appear then if our interpretation is correct the evangelist makes it clear in his own distinctive language and thought that he has in mind the conferring of the Spirit from the very beginning. To soften what perhaps might seem to some too novel or too revolutionary an approach, he makes a judicious blend of traditional material with his own redactional interpretations. This approach is not of course restricted to the sayings on the Holy Spirit and is at one with what we find in other areas of comparison within the Gospel. The future character of the sayings on the Paraclete can be paralleled with the sayings that point forward to the Passion of Jesus, especially those relating to the 'hour'. The close link of the Paraclete sayings with the context of farewell, shows that the coming of the Spirit is linked solidly with the work of Christ so that one is inseparable from the other. The historical sequence must be maintained and both the glorification and the coming of the Spirit can be seen as two closely related aspects of salvation history. Cullmann can write, "The whole perspective of the Gospel puts the historical life of Jesus in its place as the decisive mid-point of history more emphatically than any other Gospel does." /12/ This is especially true of the glorification of Jesus but it is also true of the related concept of the coming of the Paraclete which is bound up in an inner necessity with the historic Jesus.

Notes

1. The occurrences of 'Spirit' by itself are 1.32,33;3.5, 6, 8(2),34; 4.23, 24(2); 6.63(2); 7.39(2).
2. Cf. B.Lindars, The Gospel of John, London, 1972,
3. The passages are Mk 16.15,16; Mt 28.19f; Acts 1.8
4. The occurrences in the order of the Gospels are: 'pempō', 4/1/10/32; 'apostellō', 22/20/25/28. The two terms are barely distinguishable in meaning in the Fourth Gospel

5. H. Windisch, 'The Spirit-Paraclete in the Fourth Gospel', Philadelphia, 1968(ET), p.3 considers that the five Paraclete sayings do not belong to the original text of the farewell discourses. The passages are: 14.15-17; 14.25-26; 15.26-27; 16.5-11; 16.12-15.
6. Cf. Franz Müssner, The Historical Jesus in the Gospel of St. John, London, 1967, p.59-67.
7. op.cit. p.63f.
8. The passages are: being sent by the Father (14.16; 5.30;), both spoken of as 'coming' (15.26 and 1.9), bearing witness to Jesus (15.26 and 8.14), not speaking of themselves (16.13 and 7.16f); cf. also the discussion in G. Bornkamm, Geschichte und Glaube, I, Munich, 1968, p.69.
9. Cf. commentaries by Bernard, Sanders/Mastin, Lindars.
10. Consummatum Est, London, 1958, p.106
11. E. Käsemann, The Testament of Jesus, London, 1968 (ET) speaks of an unreflected or naive docetism in the Johannine portrait of Jesus (pp 66,70).
12. O. Cullmann, Salvation in History, London, 1967 (ET), p.290.

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Demythologizing Old and New, and Luke'sDescription of the Ascension: A Layman's Appraisal.

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It is no secret that many theologians, teachers and preachers nowadays do not believe Luke's description of the Ascension, nor Mark's either for that matter. They do not believe that those things happened which Luke says happened, nor that the apostles saw what Luke said they saw. There is nothing new about this: for various reasons the majority of Luke's contemporaries, on hearing the Apostles' report of the Ascension, rejected it forthwith, and so have the majority of mankind ever since. The only new thing is that in our own times large numbers of those who profess the Christian faith have joined the great majority, for reasons, they say, of cosmology, in not believing what Luke has written. They still, be it said, profess faith in the Ascension and its meaning (whatever that may be); it is Luke's description of it that they no longer believe. It follows nonetheless that when they talk of the Ascension they are by no means talking of the same thing as Luke, and it might seem strange at first that they should insist on retaining the same terms for what is now something very different.

But this behaviour too has ancient precedents, and should not surprise us. When Israel in the desert found themselves unable to continue believing in a Moses who had ascended the mountain, they continued nonetheless to use the name of Moses' God, Jehovah; only now the name denoted not the God who had literally descended from heaven to meet Moses upon Sinai, but the golden calf (Exodus 32:1-6). None of them was so foolish or forgetful of history as to think that the golden calf which now stood before them was literally "the god which had brought them up out of the land of Egypt". They knew well enough that this golden calf itself had not even been in Egypt; they had just made it with their own hands. The calf was simply a better way of representing forces of redemption to

the modern mind, than the older theology which talked of God literally 'coming down' upon Sinai. The literalisms were crude; the symbolism more sophisticated and acceptable.

Even the present wave of 'unbelief' in Luke's account of the Ascension is scarcely new; it goes back, as we all know, to R.Bultmann and his famous 1941 lecture (English translation: New Testament and Mythology, in Kerygma and Myth, Vol 1, ed. by H.W.Bartsch, tr. by R.H.Fuller, 2nd ed., S.P.C.K., London 1964, pp. 1-16), a lecture which by now has been exhaustively discussed from every conceivable point of view until its antisupernaturalist presuppositions have become unmistakeably clear and widely advertised. Bultmann's theory has, of course, been much modified - some would even say laid to rest - by his successors; but its influence lives on. That it should do so in antisupernaturalist circles is only to be expected; what is remarkable, and calls for some explanation, is that Bultmannian axioms and presuppositions, and sometimes even his theory itself, are nowadays to be found in quarters that still imagine themselves to be the bastions of supernaturalism that they always used to be. Presumably the supernaturalists have not admitted this Trojan horse in full knowledge that it swarms inside with antisupernaturalist presuppositions that will eventually overturn their supernaturalism from the foundations upwards. Rather it would seem that they must have been convinced by Bultmann's original assurance that the strange device, demythologization, would not only prove harmless; it would also prove the only way of preserving the truth of the NT (op.cit., p.10), the only way of communicating the Gospel to modern man.

And, then, of course, they have been badly frightened. Two great serpents, said to come the one from the god, Science, the other from the goddess, Modern Cosmology, are reported to have crushed the breath out of all attempted resistance, and to have compelled the admittance of demythologization. "Man's knowledge and mastery of the world", Bultmann reported (op.cit., p.4) "have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the NT view of the world - in fact, there is no one who does."

And so in many a fortress of supernaturalism, the gates have been opened and demythologization dragged in. But before the gates are finally closed and all unsuspecting go off to sleep, had we not better question our modern Sinai a bit more closely? It could be that both his assurance and his story about the god of Science are themselves part of a disreputable myth.

Let us take first Bultmann's original assurance. It claimed that it does not matter that science has made it impossible for us to accept Luke's description of the Ascension: we have lost nothing of value. We have lost the description, that is all; the truth of the Ascension is still ours. The description is mythological; it can be safely discarded without any loss of the truth it enshrines. This assurance sounded very comforting, and many a supernaturalist has taken it at its face value. After all, what sensible man would worry if he had to give up the pretty paper wrappings round his Christmas present so long as he could keep hold of the present itself?

But since Bultmann there has arisen another generation of demythologizers. They agree with Bultmann that much of the NT is mythological, and must be demythologized. But as to Bultmann's assurance that his demythologizing could be done without losing any of the essential truths of the NT, these new demythologizing theologians now tell us that it is false, is, and always has been. Of course, literary men have known all along that Bultmann's assurance involved a prior claim to be able to do the impossible. If Luke's description of the Ascension is a myth, and every other reference to the Ascension in the NT part of the same myth, by what independent criterion could he hope to prove that he could tell us what the truth was that Luke intended by the myth? He might claim he had arrived at this truth; but by what criterion could he possibly prove that this "truth" was anything other than his own interpretation, arbitrarily imposed on Luke's myth? Never mind the literary men; the demythologizing theologians themselves now tell us that Bultmann's claim that his kind of demythologizing would preserve the

essential truths of the NT was false.

So now let us take as an example of the more modern advocates of demythologization, Dr J.D.G.Dunn and his recent article "Demythologizing - the problem of myth in the New Testament" (in New Testament Interpretation, ed. I.Howard Marshall, Paternoster Press, 1977, pp. 285-307). Dr Dunn lays it down that "the problem of myth in the NT is that the NT presents events critical to Christian faith in language and concepts which are often outmoded and meaningless to 20th century man. More precisely..."Ascension" (Acts 1: 11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess.4:16) were not merely metaphors or analogies, but were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from and depend on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us" (p.300)

Here, then, Dr.Dunn repeats and affirms Bultmann's basic contention. Luke's description of the Ascension, and much else besides in the NT is mythological. Dr. Dunn disagrees with Bultmann on the way this mythology should be demythologized, and with many a shrewd argument, rejects Bultmann's claim to have done it successfully. But that demythologizing of some sort must be done, Dr. Dunn accepts unquestioningly. What, then, of Bultmann's claim that in the process of Bultmann's kind of demythologizing, no essential truth of Christianity is lost? Dr.Dunn has no doubt: the claim is false.

"Bultmann has been attacked here from two sides", says Dr.Dunn. The two sides, we discover, are Bultmann's own more radical disciples, and critics from the theological right. The latter we will here ignore, for they could be suspected of bias against Bultmann. But not so Bultmann's own disciples. "He (Bultmann) has been attacked", explains Dr. Dunn "by his more radical disciples for the illogicality of his stopping place. If the Gospel can be translated into existentialist categories without remainder, why does Bultmann insist on retaining a reference to Christ, and defend so vigorously his right to continue speaking of "God acting in Christ"? If "the self-

understanding of the man of faith" is really the constant in the NT, then where does christology properly speaking come in at all? Does Bultmann's flight from history into the kerygma answer the problem of myth, since kerygma itself is mythological....Why indeed retain the idea of God at all? Does the first century concept of a cosmologically transcendent God not demythologize existentially into the concept of self-transcendence?" (p.298)

Translate these penetrating questions out of their professional jargon into straightforward English, and they tell us plainly that once you adopt Bultmann's brand of demythologizing, there is no logical stopping place before total abandonment of all talk of God and Christ. Bultmann's assurance to the contrary has proved hollow, witness the demythologizing theologians themselves.

Nevertheless Dr.Dunn remains convinced of the truth of Bultmann's basic contention, that much of the NT is mythological, and that demythologizing of some kind must be done. Luke's description of the Ascension, he tells us(p.300), derives from and depends on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us. That being so, it is understandable that laymen should eye Dr. Dunn's methodology and interpretations with the greatest of care. Traditionally, to the layman, theologians were the experts whose task it was to expound the histories, doctrines and truths of the NT. But the layman's confidence has been shaken. Professing to tell us what the NT teaches, the old demythologizers denied and destroyed its essential doctrines. Ominously, the new demythologizers are found to share the same premise as the old; only they claim to have discovered a better way of doing the demythologizing. Well, will it really be better? Will it expound the NT's doctrines more accurately and help us to perceive more precisely what the NT is saying? Will it this time succeed in demythologizing the NT without losing or distorting its essential truths?

II

To the layman it is perhaps inevitable that the new method of demythologizing, when he first meets it, should prove disconcerting. Demythologizing is now no longer to be a matter for the experts: it is an activity for Everyman. Indeed, the new demythologizing turns out to be a do-it-yourself-in-whatever-way-it-suits-you-best kind of demythologizing. "The point is", says Dr. Dunn(p.301), "that each must tackle it for himself and no one else can tackle it for him: for in the end of the day it is the problem of how I express my faith as a Christian." Undeniably there is a certain attractiveness in this method: toilsome though it be to have to do it yourself, once you have done it you could never be proved wrong. If anyone were to object that you had got your demythologizing wrong, all you would have to do would be to retort, "But that is what I believe", and that would be the end of the matter. After all, your faith is your faith. And when you have expressed what you believe, who shall say that you don't believe it? But attractive as this method may be as a device for expressing your faith, that is not exactly what we were looking for. We were enquiring not about your faith, but about what the NT means; and, with due respect, the two things are not necessarily the same. I could not deny that your expression of your faith was true to what you believe; but I might want to question, or even to deny, that your interpretation of the NT was a true interpretation of what the NT says. And if I cannot question that there is an end of all discussion, and we are left with ten thousand and one private statements of belief, none of which can be said to be more right or wrong than any other. What we want to know, then, is how accurate a tool for interpreting the NT this new method of demythologization is. What are its presuppositions, procedures, objectives? And, above all, when the new demythologization has been carried out, shall we be able to say with justifiable confidence, At last we know what the NT has been trying to say all these centuries, and what it means?

Unfortunately not! We must prepare ourselves for surprises, shocks and disappointments. Of the new method's objective, Dr. Dunn says "The more one regards the Christ-event and the faith of the first Christians as normative, the more tightly one is bound to the expressions of the faith and hope of these first Christians as the starting point for the elucidation and interpretation of one's own self-understanding and experience of grace"(p.301). So then, not the NT (which may, or may not, be normative), but one's own self-understanding and experience of grace are the chief things to be interpreted. At this, one gets the chilly feeling that a ghost walks. We recall that, for Bultmann, no statement about Christ in the NT was really a statement about Christ: it was a statement about man. The statement "Christ rose from the dead the third day", referred to no objective historical event other than the rise of faith in the risen Lord in the hearts of certain men(op.cit.p.42). Statements about Christ were mythological; and "the real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives"(p.10). As it shall be in another temple of which we are told(2 Thessalonians 2:4), so for Bultmann: the object of worshipful study in God's temple was not God and his self-revelation, but man and his self-understanding. As one hears what the objective of the new demythologizing is, the impression that Bultmann's ghost still walks is almost irresistible.

But perhaps our fears are groundless. Perhaps, after all, the objective of the new method is simply to be practical. All would agree that Biblical exegesis is not properly an end in itself: it is right that it should have some form of applied theology as its aim. But even if the NT is going to be no more than the starting point in this applied theology, it still remains of prime importance to interpret the starting point correctly. If the starting point be not understood correctly, how can we have confidence in the

results of the investigations which proceed from it? We must, then, insist on asking: how well does the new method of demythologizing preserve, interpret and present the essential truths of the NT? Here is the answer.

"The process of demythologizing", says Dr. Dunn (p.301) "is therefore a dialectic between me in all my 20th century conditionedness and the faith of the first Christians in all its first century conditionedness. Such a dialectic is not a once-for-all question and answer where each repeatedly puts the other in question and where one wrestles existentially with the text and with oneself till an answer begins to emerge - an answer which poses a further question in reply. Nor is it a dialogue which involves only my voice and the voice of the past, since it is only part of the wider human search for reality and truth and other voices break in posing other questions and offering other answers. Nor is it a dialogue which can ever reach finality of form or expression, since each man's question is peculiarly his own and, since 19th century gives way to 20th century, and 20th begins to give way to 21st, and each new generation has its own agenda; rather is it a dialogue which must be taken up ever afresh by each believer and by each believing community. In short, the dialectic of demythologizing is the language of living faith."

Alas for our hopes of ever understanding what the essential truths of NT are! Bultmann's method of demythologizing eliminated these truths. The new method disapproves of that, but for its part assures us that the question, What are the essential truths of the NT? can never be answered. And that for the following reasons. First, no two people ever ask the NT the same question: each man's question is peculiarly his own. Therefore, there is not one answer to our question, but as many different answers as there are people to ask questions. Secondly, no final once-for-all answer is ever given to any one man's question, but only statements that provoke further questions and so on ad infinitum. Like the myths and endless genealogies of which Paul complained (1 Timothy 1.4) the NT

itself simply "ministers questionings" and never final answers.

Well, whatever else must be said about the new method, one thing can be said at once: the new method is not new at all. It turns out to be simply an extreme version of subjective relativism, and relativism has been with us for a very long while. In recent decades, for instance, it was the position taken up by the Cambridge School of English Studies, as Dr.G.Watson has recently reminded us ("The Discipline of English, Macmillan, London, 1978); but long long ago, before ever relativism troubled the Cambridge School, it was being proclaimed by the first and greatest sophist of the Enlightenment in Greece in the 5th century BC., Protagoras himself. "Man is the measure of all things" Protagoras declared; and it is not difficult to catch echoes of his creed in the declared assumptions both of Bultmann and of the new demythologizers. But what people have always wanted to know about Protagoras is, Why did he profess to be able to teach people anything and take money for it into the bargain? If there are no universal truths to be acknowledged by all men, but truth is for each man whatever seems to him to be true, how could anyone teach another anything? And we may ask the new demythologizers the same thing. If, as they themselves say, each man must do his own demythologizing, and no man can do it for him; and if there are, and can be, no universal answers since each man's question is peculiarly his own, and the answers that each demythologizer gets from the NT are all different from every other answer given to every other demythologizer; then, why do demythologizers trouble to lecture and write books?

The next thing that can be said about the new demythologizing is that if its interpretation of the NT results in a chaos of subjective relativism, this is no more than was to be expected, in view of its presupposition that the NT, before it is interpreted, is itself a mass of subjective opinions. Did Dr.Dunn believe in the traditional sense, or in any sense at all, that Scripture is God's self-revelation to men, then it would be absurd for him to deny that God could give us

in the NT final answer, universally valid for all time. But Dr.Dunn does not believe that in the NT we have God's Word. He believes that what we have here is simply "the faith of the first Christians"(p.301). Behind that faith, he holds, there lay something that may be called "the Christ-event"; but the NT's account of that event, of the Resurrection, of the Appearances, and of the Ascension, is not reportage, not even reportage of the limited objectivity of, say, the Daily Telegraph.(or the Morning Star) describing the coronation of the Queen. It is no more than the expression of the faith of the first Christians. And in his book Unity and Diversity in the New Testament (S.C.M. Press 1977), Dr.Dunn tells us that the faith of the first christians, while possessing a common core, is for the rest a mass of mutually incompatible ideas, which arose as each NT writer came to his own subjective interpretation of the Christ-event. If this, then, is held to be the nature of the NT before it is demythologized, and if it then has to be demythologized according to highly individualistic, relativistic principles, there is no wonder that there can be no universally valid answer to the question, What are the essential truths of the NT?

The next thing, however, that must be said about the extreme relativism of the new demythologists is that it just is not true. "Each man's question", says Dr.Dunn (p.301) "is peculiarly his own". That is patently false. Thousands of people (many known to me personally) have asked, and still do ask, exactly the same question, Where is Jesus Christ now? The question has not, in spite of what Dr.Dunn says, varied as one century has given way to another. It is still the same today as ever it was. Nor does the NT give a number of mutually incompatible answers. Everywhere and consistently its answer is, He has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. And millions of Christians all down the centuries have found the answer satisfying and final, and millions still do. And what is more, these millions would claim to understand what the answer "in heaven" means. They understand from the NT that

besides our visible universe there is another world, normally invisible to us, in which the presence of God is experienced immediately. They would not claim to know very much about the nature of that world, or of its relation to our world, and they might like to put to the NT endless questions about it. On the other hand, they are perfectly ready to accept the NT's reply that, except for certain basic matters, the nature of that world cannot be expressed in the language and concepts presently available to human beings in this world (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). They do not proceed to "wrestle existentially with the text and with themselves till an answer begins to emerge". They are content to be told, because it seems to them altogether reasonable and to be expected, that they would not understand answers were any attempted. And still, and for all that, they continue to regard the original answer "in heaven", as a finally and universally valid answer, that makes perfect sense as it stands.

In this they are wise people. If a stone-age savage asked his visiting social anthropologist, how the Queen of England cooks her meat, he would be told 'with electricity'. The answer would be final and universally valid for all stone-age savages (and social anthropologists as well). If the savage asked what the electricity was, he might be told that it is a special kind of "fire", in some respects like the fire he himself knew and used, but in other respects very different - in that, for instance, it does not involve flame, and while it causes heat, it is not itself hot, and can be turned off and on by simply flicking a switch. If the savage went further and asked what is the essential nature of electricity, the reply might have to be that he could not be told. He would be a foolish man if on that score he concluded that the original answer 'With electricity' was not a universally valid, once-for-all answer, (and still more foolish if he thought that no two savages could put to the anthropologist the same question, How does the Queen cook her meat?). If ever the day arrived when

some scientist was able to explain to him the essential nature of matter and energy, the original answer would still stand as valid as it ever was: the Queen would still be cooking with electricity. Meanwhile, if the savage argued that the anthropologist's descriptions were so fairy-story-like that they must be based on some primitive mythology unacceptable to the modern savage, the anthropologist would reply: "But I know. I come from a land where electricity is very common and I have myself seen thousands of electric fires and ovens. One day I will take you to that land and you will see for yourself. Meanwhile you must trust me, and if you do, you may know on my authority that there is a "fire" called electricity, and there is a land where it is in daily use." And if the savage decided to believe the anthropologist, he would not know everything about electricity, but that would not mean that the term 'electricity' would have no meaning for him. It would mean a kind of fire, in some ways similar to the fire he used, but in other ways mysteriously different, which the Queen of a distant land and all her subjects used to cook with.

The question, therefore, would resolve itself into one of the anthropologist's authority and reliability. And that is precisely how it is with us and Christ. "Amen, amen, I tell you" said Christ to Nicodemus (John 3:11-13) "that we are speaking about what we know, and testifying of what we have seen; and you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about things on earth and you do not believe, how will you believe if I tell you about things in heaven? And no one has ascended into heaven except the One who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man". From this it is apparent first, how ancient is disbelief in Christ's statements about heaven, and, next, how little it has to do with modern science. But it is equally clear that we cannot go on calling ourselves Christians, if we in fact stand with the great majority in rejecting Christ's testimony.

III

At this demythologizers, old and new, (if any have persevered in reading so far) will probably throw up their hands in disgust. They will say, either that I have fundamentally misunderstood what they are saying, or else that, through lack of logic (or perhaps through deliberate perversity), I have misinterpreted their position. In the first place, they do not believe that Jesus ever said the words which John puts in his mouth. All talk in John's Gospel, and elsewhere in the NT, of Christ's pre-existence, his coming down from, and ascent into, heaven, is simply "the expressions of the faith and hope of the first Christians.....the faith of the first Christians in all its first century conditioned-ness" (Dunn,p.301); it is not the testimony of One who has indeed "come down" from heaven. What is more, they do not believe that any being from heaven could ever have stood on our earth and said in John's words "I came down from heaven", for the simple reason that they do not believe that in the sense in which John uses the word there is any such heaven for any such being to come down from. "No one", says Bultmann, "who is old enough to think for himself supposes that God lives in a local heaven. There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word" (p.4). "out of date conceptions", says Dr.Dunn (p.300), "determine certain traditionally important expressions of NT faith about Christ at this point - in particular "ascension" (Acts 1:11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1 Thess.4:16), were not merely metaphors or analogies, but were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from, and depend on, a first century cosmology which is impossible to us." And, therefore, when we ask, Where is Christ now? and the NT answers, He has ascended into heaven, for the demythologizers this is not only not a final answer, it is not really an answer at all: for, in its literal sense, they just cannot, and do not, believe it. And it is this that makes the dialectic of demythologization necessary. They freely admit that demythologization can never yield a final answer, but only statements and

replies that provoke further questions. But without demythologization, they maintain there would not even be questions, replies and further questions. There would simply be the original statement of the NT that Christ ascended into heaven; which, being clearly intended as a literal description, they just as clearly reject as altogether incredible.

Well, if people do not believe that there exists a heaven in the sense in which John, Luke, Paul and the rest of the NT speaks of it, and in which according to them all Christ spoke of it, then we must accept their statement: they do not believe. Let the matter rest there.

But the demythologizers will not let it rest there. They are concerned for those of us who do not believe. Bultmann warns us (p.4) that for a modern scientifically minded man (and are we not all that?), to believe Luke's description of the Ascension would be to run the risk of "a curious form of schizophrenia and insincerity". Dr. Dunn is milder in his language, but none the less concerned. Believers in Luke's description of the Ascension are attempting to do what is for modern man impossible. Luke's description, he tells us (p.300), derives from and depends on a first century cosmology. The cosmology was wrong, fanciful, unreal. Then the description must be false. The Ascension did not take place as Luke describes it. To attempt to believe it did, is to believe an unreality, and believing in known unrealities is impossible for modern man (for anybody, we should have thought). Obviously, then, we must be dissuaded from attempting the impossible: we must not believe Luke's description of the Ascension.

Then what are we to do with it? Let Dr. Dunn tell us. ".... one must always seek to rediscover afresh the reality of the love and faith and hope which these words expressed, and then seek to re-express that reality in language meaningful to one's own experience and to one's neighbour" (p.301). So Luke's description expresses "a reality of faith": something which he really believed and presumably something which was really true. How else could it be a reality? But, whatever else Luke

believed, did he not really believe that the Ascension took place as he said it did? For him surely it was a "reality of faith": he really believed it happened. But we have just been told that it did not happen as he thought it did. He really believed, but it was believing in an unreality. Nonetheless his unreal description expresses a "reality of faith".

How shall we resolve the conundrum? Easily. His description is not intended literally, it is a metaphor or analogy. We may then reject the Ascension as a literal event, but accept the reality that the metaphor conveys.

No, says Dr.Dunn. That's the trouble. If his description were merely intended as a metaphor or analogy, there would be no problem. "The problem...is ...that "ascension" (Acts 1:11) and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven" (Mark 13:26; 1Thess.4:16) were not merely metaphors or analogies but were intended as literal descriptions....."(p.301).

How then does Luke's description of the Ascension, intended as literal description, but false and unreal, express a reality of faith? It manages to do that, Dr. Dunn explains, by being a theological statement. Talk of ascension is an example of first century theologizing (p.301)

We get the idea. Luke started by believing something or other about Christ. As yet we cannot say what that something was; to discover that we must first demythologize the theological statement which he subsequently used to express whatever it was that he originally believed. But whatever it was, for him it was a reality of faith, something that he really believed, and something that was really true of Christ. Then he decided that other people ought to know about this reality: he had a duty to express it. He decided that the best way to communicate this reality was to make a theological statement. So he invented (or took over from some other inventor) a story of a literal Ascension witnessed by apostles. He then managed to convince himself that this invented story

was literally true, and in its turn it came to be for him a reality of faith. This second reality of faith he then offered as an expression of the reality of whatever it was that he originally believed.

Unfortunately the second reality was not true, it was only a theological statement. Our job is to take this theological statement, untrue as to the facts as it is, and rediscover what the original reality was which this unreality was meant to express.

Difficult, you say. Very difficult, says Dr. Dunn: for "if such first century theologizing as...talk of...ascension can no longer have the same meaning for us as it had for the first Christians, what meaning should it have?" (p.301). Well, we reply, whatever meaning you decide to give it as a result of your demythologization, it will not be of any use in determining Luke's meaning: you have just told yourself that it can no longer be the meaning which Luke intended. It will be a different meaning.

How then shall we ever do what we were told we must do? How are we to discover the 'reality of faith' that Luke's 'theologizing' description of the Ascension expresses? What a man believes in his heart we can only know if he expresses it in words. If his words cannot have the same meaning for us as they had for him, to try to discover what he believes is to attempt the impossible.

And that is only the first impossibility; there is another. We are told that we must try to rediscover the reality of faith that Luke's description of the Ascension expresses. At the same time we are told that the literal Ascension was for him a reality of faith, but, alas, it was not real. His faith was mistaken. The Ascension did not take place as he believed; and of course his description, therefore, cannot have the same meaning for us as it did for him. Well then, however did we know in the first place that behind his false description of the Ascension there was a reality of faith, and not simply another instance of first

century theologizing, equally unacceptable to modern man as the literal description of the Ascension, and equally in need of demythologization, before we can know what it really means, and so on in infinite regression? If we know independently of Luke that there was a reality of faith behind his description, and if independently of him we know what it was, and that it was a genuine reality, then we may spare ourselves the arduous toil of demythologizing his description. But if we are dependent on Luke's description in order to know what reality of faith lay behind it, it is impossible for us to know in advance that there was genuine reality of faith behind the description.

Bultmann, we remember, warned us against attempting an impossibility: it could induce schizophrenia and insincerity. But the new method of demythologizing unashamedly requires us to attempt two; and that is high price to pay for a method of exegesis which on its own confession derives from Luke's writings a meaning which *ex hypothesi* cannot be the same meaning as Luke intended. It is useless to urge us in this situation to engage in the dialectic of demythologization with the text until "an answer begins to emerge" (where from? we wonder). If the demythologizers are going to reduce our study of Scripture to the level of a Socratic dialogue in which some Greek who does not know the truth carries on a dialogue with Socrates who freely confesses that he does not know the truth either, in the hope that ignorant Greek and ignorant Socrates may together by means of dialectic pursue their quest until an answer begins to emerge; even so, it is necessary that the ignorant Greek should understand exactly what Socrates means by his questions, answers and tentative definitions. Dialectic is the last method on earth for finding out the truth if by definition your interlocutor's words and expressions cannot have the same meaning for you as they have for him.

As a tool for interpreting the essential truths of the NT, the new method of demythologizing is no more to be trusted than the old. Its counsels are the counsels

of despair. If then we ask what drives professional exegetes of outstanding intellectual powers, such as Dr. Dunn, to embrace this method and urge its use upon us, with one voice they all answer, Modern cosmology. The answer is so startling, and on the face of it so very much like a slander, that, if only for the sake of the reputation of cosmology, we ought to investigate it very closely indeed.

IV

The charge brought against Luke's description of the Ascension runs as follows. Says Bultmann (p.4) "Man's knowledge and mastery of the world have advanced to such an extent through science and technology that it is no longer possible for anyone seriously to hold the NT view of the world.....What meaning, for instance, can we attach to such phrases in the creed as "descended into hell" (Bultmann surely knew that no such phrase appears in the NT) or "ascended into heaven"? We no longer believe in the three-storied universe which the creeds take for granted.....There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of the word. The same applies to hell, in the sense of a mythical world under our feet. And if this is so, the story of Christ's descent into hell, and of his Ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven, or hope that the faithful will meet him in the air(1 Thess.4:15ff). Says Dr.Dunn(p.300): "...ascension"... and parousia "in clouds" "from heaven"...were intended as literal descriptions, but descriptions which derive from and depend on a first century cosmology which is impossible to us".

The charge is not only serious: apparently it is certain. Here there is no "wrestling with the text existentially here until an answer begins to emerge", which turns out to be not a final answer but simply an occasion for further questions. No room here either for each man to put his own peculiar question to the

text and get back his own peculiar answer. No, Luke's description derives from, and depends on, a first century cosmology. The demythologizers have said so: and they can expect it to be universally accepted as axiomatic. Moreover, not only can they tell us that the description derived from first century cosmology: they can tell us from which particular first century cosmology it was derived. There were, as we all know, several cosmologies current in the first century AD. The Stoics had theirs, the Epicureans another. Two centuries earlier, the learned Aristarchus of Samos had put forth his heliocentric system; and doubtless the mass of people, both educated and uneducated, were as vague in their thinking about cosmology as their counterparts are today. But out of all these systems the demythologizers can tell us that Luke was very precise in his cosmological thinking and held the "three-decker" theory of cosmology: heaven above, hell below, and earth in the middle.

If we ask how they can possibly know this with such certainty, the answer is that they deduce it from Luke's description of the Ascension. When he depicts our Lord on his way to heaven, he has him rising up from the earth into the sky; which shows he must have held a cosmology in which heaven lies above earth. Had he depicted Christ moving westward instead of going up, you could have deduced that he held a cosmology in which heaven lay, like some Elysian fields, in the far-west of a flat earth.

But there is a snag. Deducing which cosmology Luke held from his description of the Ascension is perfectly valid, if and only if, you know for certain that he made up his story, and that it was derived from a first century cosmology. If, in fact, he was simply recording what actually happened before the astonished eyes of the apostles, without any regard for whatever cosmological system his description might fit into, then cosmological deduction from his description would be highly dubious. How then do the demythologizers know with such certainty, before they start their

deductions , that the description was derived from a first century cosmology? For notice that the demythologizers are not content to say that in describing the Ascension, Luke has borrowed terms from some first century cosmology. A stone-age savage, suddenly whisked away to Cape Canaveral, to witness the ascent of a manned space rocket, might well on his return describe the rocket's ascent to his fellows in terms taken from the cosmology favoured by stone-age savages. That would not mean, however, that his description was a fiction derived from this cosmology: far from it, the description would be derived from the actual ascent of the rocket. How, we repeat, do the demythologizers manage to know in advance that Luke's description is a fiction derived from some first century cosmology?

The answer seems to be that it is self-evidently a fiction. Luke depicts Christ entering heaven by ascending up into the sky, because Luke really thought that heaven was up in the sky somewhere. But we now know that there is no heaven up in the sky, and that Christ could not have reached heaven by journeying up through space. Therefore, what Luke describes could not have happened. Luke is caught out like a criminal who has used an alibi which he did not realise was actually impossible.

But Luke does not say that Christ reached heaven simply by journeying up into the sky. If we look at what Luke actually says (Acts 1:9), instead of contenting ourselves with other people's paraphrases of what he says, we shall find that Christ's "journey to heaven" involved two stages. First, "while they were looking, he was taken up". That part involved a literal physical ascent into the air; and that part of the journey they saw: it happened "while they were looking". But there was a second stage which Luke himself tells us that they did not see: "a cloud received him out of their sight". What happened then, and how the passage from our world to the other world was effected, Luke does not attempt to describe, or even claim to know. Nor does he speculate on the nature of the cloud that removed Christ

from the apostle's sight any more than he does on the nature of that other cloud which removed Moses and Elijah from sight on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:34-35) and from which Peter solemnly affirms that he literally and physically heard the divine voice speaking (2 Peter 1:12-18) - and adds that, in recording the fact, he is not telling a myth (1:16).

Now it is at once evident that Luke's description of the removal of Moses and Elijah from the apostles' sight is not in any way derived from a first century cosmology. The demythologizers, to be sure, will not believe the story any more for that. At best, they will regard it as another myth, and attribute it to who-knows-what Jewish or Roman or Hellenistic source. Never mind: the point remains that the account has nothing to do with cosmology sensu stricto. Nothing could be deduced from it as to what particular cosmology, if any, Luke held. And the same is true about Luke's description of Christ's comings and goings after the Resurrection and before the final Ascension. From the home at Emmaus (Luke 24:31), he simply vanished instantaneously. Later he suddenly appeared (24:36), and comings and goings of this sort continued, according to Acts 1:3, throughout a period of forty days. Why this final departure was preceded by a physical ascent into the air, we must consider in a moment; but it is clear that Luke did not imagine that physical ascent because he believed in a three-decker universe, in which the only way to get to heaven would be to travel up through the sky.

If Luke's description of the Ascension, then, is not derived from first century cosmology, neither is it rendered incredible by the findings of modern cosmology. Modern cosmology has an enormous amount to tell us about the universe (yet how little is known); but it cannot, and does not, presume to tell us that there is no other world or worlds outside our universe, or that there is no other world, or worlds, co-incident with and inter-penetrating our universe, but not observable by the techniques available to cosmologists. Still

less can it teach us that there is no created world where the Presence of God, as the NT indicates by its analogy with the tabernacle (Hebrews 6:19-20; 8:2-5; 9:1-12, 23-28; 10:19-22), is perceived and experienced more immediately than it is in our world.

But let us come to the very heart of the matter, the central truths of God's self-revelation, as we have them in Scripture: that God transcends space and time, since he created them; that the Son, being of the same nature as the Father, and therefore transcending space and time, nevertheless condescended at the Incarnation to become involved in space and time, without the loss of the divine transcendence; and that the Son's ascension "far above all things" (Eph.4:10), "where he was before" (John 6:62) does not mean the loss of his incarnational involvement with space and time. No one pretends that it is easy to comprehend the great truths that are made known to us by this revelation, or to find terms and concepts in which to talk about them adequately. But, without doubt, the central issue is whether we believe that God, who is transcendent, can make room for himself in the time and space which he has created or not, and therefore demanded that all statements in Scripture that imply that he can, and has and will, must be understood as myth, because they cannot be understood literally. But Bultmann's denial of the possibility has clearly nothing to do with modern cosmology. If cosmology of any kind has influenced Bultmann in this matter, then as Professor T.F.Torrance has suggested (Space, Time and Incarnation, Oxford, 1969, reprint 1978, p.49) it may be that it was the old Lutheran receptacle notion of space that troubled him. The real cause of his inability to accept the Biblical statements of God's presence and activity within space and time as literal statements, was not cosmology, certainly not modern cosmology, but "his deistic assumption that God does not interact with this world, which he regarded as a closed continuum of cause and effect".

And when we come to the other element in Luke's description of the Ascension, the preliminary rising up

into the air before the disappearance, it is clear that if we understand it literally, and we believe it, we are professing belief in miracle. Many modern men certainly confess themselves to be unable to believe in miracle. But it is not science, at least not true science, that makes them unable. Science can tell us that statistically miracles are exceedingly improbable; but we knew that already by definition. Not all the branches of science combined, let alone modern cosmology by itself, could tell us that miracles cannot happen. Whether any miracles at all, or the miracle of the Ascent in particular, have ever taken place is a historical, and not a scientific, question.

V

It is our contention, then, that Luke's description of the Ascension was not derived from a first century cosmology: it is simply a description of what happened. Its first stage, the Ascent into the air, does not imply that Luke believed in a three-decker universe in which in order to get to heaven, one had to journey up through the sky. On other occasions, Christ vanished into that other world without any preliminary rising into the air.

Why, then, at the Ascension, we may ask, was his disappearance preceded by a preliminary physical ascent? Two possible answers suggest themselves.

In Luke's account (Acts 1:6-11), our Lord's Ascent happened while he was answering the Apostles' question, "Is it at this time that you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" Indeed, it was itself, as we shall see, part of his answer. What had provoked this question in their minds was the fact that, not only had Christ risen from the dead, leaving behind an empty tomb; but the One who had left them by death, had come back to them several times in the course of the Forty days. For all they knew, these "comings" might have gone on occurring indefinitely: and it was natural for them to expect that one of these comings might turn out

to be the great Coming, prophesied by the OT, which should restore the kingdom to Israel. Moreover, their hopes along this line were increased by the promise that, in a few days' time, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, promised by Ezekial and Joel, should take place. Christ, therefore, had not only to indicate to them in words that the restoration of Israel would not take place yet, but also to demonstrate to them that the Great Coming that would bring about the restoration of Israel, would be different from the comings and goings of the Forty Days. In them, the appearances and the disappearings were instantaneous with no preliminary warning or indication. The manner of the Great Coming will be different. And to demonstrate it, our Lord, before disappearing, rose up into the air before their astonished eyes, and angels came to point out the lesson it was meant to convey: "this Jesus....shall so come in like manner as you have seen him go into heaven".

Experience has subsequently shown that the demonstration was not unnecessary. We are told by some that the description of the Parousia when "he comes with clouds and every eye shall see him" (Rev.1:7), must not be taken literally. All it really means is that Christ "comes" in the great crises of history. No one sees him come, no one sees him go, there is nothing for anyone, believer or unbeliever, to see, and many people remain unconvinced that he has come at all. But to interpret the descriptions of the Parousia thus, is to deny the precise point that, according to the angels, the token demonstration of the preliminary Ascent was intended to teach.

The second answer to our question is not one that Scripture itself gives. It may not, therefore, be right. It is worth putting it forward as a suggestion, however, if only as a means of clarifying a prevalent confusion. The suggestion is that the preliminary Ascent into the air may have been intended as symbolical of the Ascension in the higher sense of that word. The confusion is that many people think that if an event

described in Scripture can be shown to have symbolic meaning, it follows that the event is not to be regarded as a literal, physical, historical event. But events can be both literal and symbolic. If a child is told that in such and such a year Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne, he may imagine that the phrase "ascended the throne" means "climbed up and sat on a big chair". He will have to be told that that is not what the phrase means in this context. It has a bigger meaning. The child, if badly taught, might then conclude that there is no literal big chair, and that the Queen never literally climbs up and sits on it. He would be wrong again. There is, and she does.

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Norman K. Gottwald:

The Tribes of Yahweh: a
sociology of the religion of
liberated Israel, 1250 - 1050
B.C.E.

SCM Press, 1980 ppxxvi + 916
£12.95

There is no doubt that in this massive and comprehensive treatment of ancient Israel N.K. Gottwald has written a most important book, and a most interesting and stimulating contribution to the scholarly literature on the history of Israel. It is a mine of informed discussion, on a wide-ranging list of topics, major and minor, relevant to O.T. study. It is vital reading for all students of the so-called Judges era; and, it may be fairly added, it is something of a bargain in these days of inflation.

To outline the contents with anything like thoroughness would occupy the space of a normal review, and I will not attempt it. The book breaks down into three major areas of enquiry. First, the relevant biblical material is explored in depth and detail - not only the books of Joshua and Judges, but the whole Pentateuch as well. Then Gottwald moves on to the historical questions; this section is the central core of the book. He turns finally to religious and theological aspects. In most parts of the book, his sociological interest and expertise are very visible. In his literary enquiry, he mainly follows M. Noth; in his historical investigation, it is G.E. Mendenhall to whom he is most indebted; while Karl Marx is his chief mentor in his approach to Israel's religion.

His major conclusions, on his own enumeration (page xxiii), are five in number. He maintains firstly that early Israel was "an eclectic formation of marginal and depressed Canaanite people"; secondly, that it arose from within Canaanite society; thirdly, that the social structure it adopted was a deliberate "retribalization"; fourthly, that the religion of Yahweh was a "crucial . . . instrument" to unify and maintain this new society; and fifthly, that a sociology of Israel's religion offers a

much better account and explanation of its distinctiveness than did the biblical theology movement.

The reviewer is not one of those castigated and admonished in Gottwald's first chapters because of their antipathy towards sociological enquiry. On the contrary, I am convinced that it has much to teach us, not least about ancient Israel. The most valuable sections of the book in the reviewer's judgement are precisely those where Gottwald offers us relatively pure sociological investigations - especially his extended examination of the structure of the Israelite tribes in Part VI.

Most of Gottwald's sociology is not so "pure", however, and his "applied" sociology raised doubts of various kinds. In reading his book, it is best to realize at the outset that his purpose is not to examine de novo and objectively the sociology of Israel without presuppositions of any kind; his very single-minded purpose is to defend by all means the proposition, first advocated by Mendenhall, that Israel first came into being as a revolt of Canaanite peasants against their feudal overlords. Most scholars hitherto have held that the Israelite tribes entered Canaan from outside (as indeed the O.T. writers themselves clearly state), even though there has been much controversy in recent years as to whether the settlement was relatively peaceful (a process of immigration) or whether it was indeed preceded by military conquest, as the book of Joshua depicts it.

The three models - conquest, immigration and revolt - should not be regarded as essentially mutually exclusive. The first two, indeed, may be seen as opposite ends of a single spectrum; the truth may well lie somewhere in the middle. The revolt model too can be fitted into a bigger structure; it is noteworthy that both Bright and de Vaux have proved willing to accommodate it in their reconstructions of Israel's settlement in Canaan: Gottwald, for his part, accepts that a (very small) group of Israelites escaping from Egypt was the catalyst which precipitated the revolt. All three hypotheses, then, may be true in part. The major need, therefore, is not the negative task of refuting two of the models totally, but the positive one of determining which of the three was basic and fundamental in the creation of Israel as a people.

When one analyses the nature of the three hypotheses, one sees why Gottwald is so interested in sociological aspects. While it may be true that scholars supporting the other two hypotheses have paid insufficient heed to sociological questions, thereby giving less than a comprehensive picture of ancient Israelite society, one can nevertheless recognize that Bright and Noth (for instance) had no need of sociology as an explanation of Israel's existence. For them, Israel was a foreign intrusion on Canaanite soil, and hence intrinsically different from Canaanite society. But by contrast, the revolt hypothesis has the major task of explaining why Canaanites separated from and fought against other Canaanites, and proceeded to call themselves Israelites and worship a different deity. The explanation could only be sociological, and Gottwald's book supplies this necessary undergirding of the hypothesis.

(Mendenhall before him offered a sociological rationale, but Gottwald finds it unsatisfactory.) Once this point is grasped, it becomes apparent that Gottwald's detailed sociological arguments have no evidential value whatever. If indeed a large-scale Canaanite revolt actually happened, then Gottwald's researches will give us much help in understanding why; but the fundamental question still remains, "Is there the slightest reason to believe it did in fact happen?".

Sociology might have proved that the necessary preconditions existed, i.e., that such a revolt could have happened; but only historical enquiry, based on literary and archaeological investigations, will ever prove that it did happen. The double-edged value of sociology is amply demonstrated by the fact the the researches of C.H.J. de Geus (The Tribes of Israel, 1976), which explored very much the same sociological territory as Gottwald, led that scholar to reject the revolt hypothesis. It is remarkable, in fact, that on page 896, in response to de Geus, Gottwald makes the astonishing statement that "A revolt model has no need to deny that the great majority of the ingredient peoples of Israel had been long in the land and that they had achieved identity as a recognised sector or segment of the populace". If this is true, then Gottwald seems to have capitulated to one of the other

hypotheses, at any rate, his alleged revolt then becomes an episode in the history of Israel rather than the very means by which Israel came into being.

Since Gottwald constantly stresses the importance of scientific method, a reviewer may fairly adduce the scientific principle of "economy" and "elegance". Is not the revolt an unnecessary hypothesis? Are not the origins of Israel more easily and simply explained in terms of the conquest or immigration models, or some combination of the two? In his critique of these two hypotheses, Gottwald has no new nor particularly persuasive objections to offer; "sociology" has disproved neither of them. That there are difficulties about both is conceded; but there is no reason to suppose that in some way they cancel each other out.

There are many points in a book of this size where individual scholars will inevitably want to enter into dialogue with the author. In the space of a review, it must suffice to draw attention to some of the most important of the controversial features of Gottwald's treatment.

In the first place, Gottwald's handling of the biblical data is worrying. He combines a far-reaching historical scepticism with a readiness to utilize any material in the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges and Samuel that proves congenial. To claim that the O.T. picture of a total conquest is over-simplified is one thing; to deny it in toto is quite another; and to discover a revolt merely by reading between the lines shows a remarkable confidence in one's own imagination. Rahab is his paradigm - a member of an oppressed and exploited class in society who welcomed the Israelites and thus tacitly revolted against the Canaanite city-state system. If revolt really was the predominant factor in the creation of Israel, it is astonishing that it has left so few and such obscure traces in the O.T. record. Nor can one follow Gottwald in his attempt to convert virtually all Israel's enemies into aristocrats. His hypothesis that the recurring phrase "inhabitants of the land" should be retranslated "rulers of the land" is ingenious, but can scarcely be sustained on any objective linguistic basis; if he is wrong in this respect, however, much of his argument falls to the ground.

Secondly, the picture Gottwald draws of Israelite

society prior to the monarchy strains one's credulity to the limit. It was apparently a mirror-image of everything that the U.S.A. is in part and ought to be - an amalgam of motley peoples, created by rebellion against a monarchic system, egalitarian, caring, and even tending towards the abolition of "sexism" . . . ! Gottwald acknowledges in his preface that a powerful factor in writing the book was his involvement for decades in (American) civil rights struggles. All very admirable, no doubt, but hardly conducive to the objective critical study of an ancient people. Gottwald tries to anticipate such objections by saying in effect that history might repeat itself. It might; but if Israel prior to the monarchy really was such a golden age, we might expect to find some trace of nostalgia for it in the biblical documents. Yet on the contrary, the O.T. perspective is that the eras of Moses and of David were the great moments in Israel's history. Gottwald's conviction that ancient Canaanites must have rebelled against feudalism owes too much to Marx's view of history.

Thirdly, it has to be said that Gottwald's understanding of Israelite religion is inadequate. While one fully agrees with his criticisms of those scholars who have tended to isolate the religion of Israel from its sociological environment, one cannot accept the identification of religion as a mere function of society. Yahweh to his worshippers was surely far more than just a "symbol of a single-minded pursuit of an egalitarian tribal social system". Gottwald allows insufficient scope for the numinous or the charismatic aspects of religion. Not only will Christians and Jews protest at this emptying of religion, but many agnostics and atheists too will feel that Marx's interpretation of history and religion in terms of economics is much too narrow a view. Of course economics are important; but if anyone doubts that different ethnic and religious backgrounds are capable of dividing and polarizing a society more radically and violently than economic and class distinctions, he need only consider Northern Ireland! (Who knows, perhaps Ulster rather than the U.S.A. should provide the model for interpreting ancient Israel?)

The reviewer, then, finds that this magnum opus fails to carry conviction as regards its broad conclusions. Only time will tell whether O.T. scholarship as a whole

is more impressed; it looks as if the revolt hypothesis is here to stay, at least. Be that as it may, one must congratulate Gottwald on many helpful insights and frequent challenges to one's presuppositions, and on a most readable and stimulating book.

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Contributors

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